



# An Overview of Five Internet Legal Research Alternatives to Westlaw and LexisNexis

by Alyssa Altshuler

The archetype of the Trickster is common in many cultures around the world. Folktales abound in which an animal or other entity changes its true appearance to trick an unsuspecting person or animal into giving him what he wants. Generally, these tricksters want to get something for nothing. The coyote in American Indian folklore, for example, often changes its form to beguile an innocent rabbit or turtle into becoming its next meal.<sup>1</sup>

Virginia lawyers need to exercise good judgment and caution so that they will not be tricked by one of the latest Internet legal research alternatives to Westlaw™ or LexisNexis™. Attorneys are barraged by telephone solicitors, print advertisements, and mail offers to use an alternative on-line legal research database for a nominal fee. What appears to be a solid company offering access to vast up-to-date legal materials may not be everything that it advertises itself to be.

## Westlaw and LexisNexis

Westlaw, headquartered in Eagan, Minnesota, has been providing on-line legal research for the past 26 years. LexisNexis, in Dayton, Ohio—while having gone through many logo and name change permutations—has been providing on-line legal research since 1973. These companies provide the most extensive coverage and scope of on-line legal research. Costs of print products in the legal publishing arena have grown at an exponential rate. The on-line research costs for Westlaw and LexisNexis have risen accordingly. Each company charges more for employing the latest technology and providing the most up-to-date and enhanced databases.

These industry giants monopolized on-line legal research. Each buys the competition, usually a smaller company that offers a niche legal research database, easily subsumed under the larger corporate umbrella. Not all of these alternative on-line legal research databases are for sale to the highest bidder. These companies are trying to prove that they are a true alternative to Westlaw and LexisNexis.

In today's economy, even the largest law firms in Virginia re-evaluate their yearly budgets for on-line legal research fees, ever mindful of what clients can afford. They are more receptive to learning more about low-cost legal research alternatives. Smaller law firms and solo practitioners in Virginia are also aware of the costs of on-line legal research and want to know if these low-cost legal research alternatives are valid.

## An Overview of Five Low-Cost Alternatives to Westlaw and LexisNexis

What follows are synopses of five low-cost alternatives to Westlaw and LexisNexis—Loislaw<sup>2</sup>; NationalLawLibrary<sup>3</sup>; Quicklaw America<sup>4</sup>; theLaw.net<sup>5</sup>; and VersusLaw<sup>6</sup>. These companies were chosen for their higher quality from a myriad of Internet legal research companies.

### *Loislaw* ([www.loislaw.com](http://www.loislaw.com))

History: Loislaw is headquartered in Van Buren, Arkansas. An Aspen Publishers company, it launched its on-line product in 1999.

**Coverage:** Included are case law, statutory law, constitutions, administrative law, court rules, and other authority for all 50 states and the District of Columbia, as well as 18 federal law libraries. State and federal laws are covered for the past 70 years.

**Citation Service:** GlobalCite<sup>SM</sup> is an alternative citation service, which the company claims is competitive with both LexisNexis and Westlaw. It provides a summary of all sources in the Loislaw database that cite to the document that the subscriber is viewing and provides a hyperlink to the documents.

**Research Assistance/Technical Support:** Both are offered 24-hours-a-day, seven-days-a-week.

**Training:** Research guides and tutorials are offered on-line. Telephonic or on-site training is available from the state account representative.

**Cost:** Cost ranges from \$179 to \$199 per month or \$2,148 to \$2,388 per year, with a free state CD-ROM sent as part of the subscription fee.

**New Products:** Lois LawWatch<sup>TM</sup> provides an electronic clipping service for any relevant articles, laws or cases which are related to a subject area that the subscriber has profiled.

#### *NationalLawLibrary (www.itislaw.com)*

**History:** NationalLawLibrary, headquartered in Houston, Texas, launched its on-line product in 1998. The company describes itself as a "virtual on-line legal repository powered by the Litidex<sup>®</sup> technology that contains comprehensive full-text, word-searchable legal databases."

**Coverage:** Both state and federal law are included. Its state law coverage dates back to 1950, and the extent of the coverage for some states is 1999, while other states are current through 2001. Most of the federal material dates back to 1950, and the extent of the coverage in some federal circuits is 1999, while most circuits are current through 2001.

**Citation service:** CaseCite<sup>TM</sup> is used to verify case holdings and provides a hit list of referencing cases.

**Research Assistance/Technical Support:** Both are available 24 hours-a-day, seven-days-a-week.

**Training:** A detailed demo tutorial is available on the Web site that provides guidance on searching techniques.

**Cost:** Depending on what research libraries an attorney is interested in subscribing to, the cost ranges from \$25 to \$75 monthly or \$2.95 to \$4.95 per search. Printing is free.

**New Products:** Multi-database searching was released in mid-May that allows users to conduct a single search across all the databases in a single state collection such as cases, statutes and rules. By the end of 2001, the company plans to have a single search cover all 50 states and 11 federal circuits.

#### *Quicklaw America (www.quicklawamerica.com)*

**History:** Quicklaw America, headquartered in East Meadow, New York, launched its on-line product in early 2000. The company states that it "provides on-line access to federal and state court

decisions, statutes, regulations, court rules, topical databases, legal newspapers and periodicals, as well as law and related information from the United Kingdom, Canada, Australia and other common law countries."

**Coverage:** Federal case law for most circuits dating back to the 1930s and very limited state law coverage are provided. Provides only federal statutory material.

**Citation Service:** Citation is limited to United States Supreme Court cases and 7th Circuit cases.

**Research Assistance/Technical Support:** Both Monday to Friday from 8 A.M. to 8 P.M. (local) and on weekends from 9 A.M. to 5 P.M. (local) are offered.

**Training:** The "Quick Reference Guide to Quicklaw America" is offered, which provides instructions for structuring queries and a database directory. Each can be downloaded.

**Cost:** Transactional pricing with an option to subscribe under a flat-rate pricing plan is offered. Generally, it costs \$5 per search, which provides "unlimited browsing, saving and printing of documents retrieved by a search, as well as unlimited access to decisions cited in retrieved documents." A flat rate subscription fee that offers unlimited access to Quicklaw America's databases can be set up by the company's account representative for about \$70 per month, per user.

**New Products:** The company is concentrating on building and enhancing its core case law collection. It also plans on rolling out annotated statutes for the United States Code and for selected states. There is no plan to expand into secondary legal materials.

#### *TheLaw.net (www.thelaw.net)*

**History:** The Law.net, headquartered in San Diego, launched its on-line product one year ago as "a next-generation virtual law library and law office facilitator with over 50,000 resources providing enterprise-wide, uniform access to millions of legal research and reference documents, databases and law office facilitators."

**Coverage:** State case law from all state supreme courts and most intermediate level appellate courts are provided. Federal cases include the United States Supreme Court and all federal circuits. Both state and federal material date to the 1930s. There is unlimited access to state and federal statutes and regulations. Secondary coverage includes more than 50,000 deep links to Web-based documents and databases including state and federal statutes, rules, administrative law, forms, courts, executive agency materials, legislature materials, topic and practice area helpers, bar associations, news, and reference desk materials. The news menu provides links to local and topical legal news. The "Reference Desk and Law Office Facilitator" provides links to a myriad of practical resources located on the Web.

**Citation service:** While hits to documents that reference a citation are provided, editorial enhancement is not.

**Research Assistance/Technical Support:** Each subscription includes unlimited reference attorney support and technical support.

**Training:** Only telephonic, which can be done on an individualized basis or for a group, is provided.

**Cost:** \$1 per user, per day, or up to \$3 per five users, per day.

**New Products:** The Law.net plans to continue positioning itself as the benchmark in providing access to resources which will enable a solo or small-firm to perform solid legal research as well as providing access to pertinent practical information for the practice of law.

### *VersusLaw* ([www.versuslaw.com](http://www.versuslaw.com))

**History:** VersusLaw, headquartered in Redmond, Washington, has been in print since its founding in 1985. It launched its on-line product in 1995 to "broaden its focus and mission: to provide all legal practitioners access to current, in-depth, easy-to-use legal research, regardless of the size of their firms, by using the power of technology."

**Coverage:** State and federal case law and minimal state statutes are provided, while administrative codes, court rules, jury instructions, attorney general opinions, or other primary legal materials are not. Most of the state case law dates back to the 1930s or to the 1950s, and most of the federal circuit cases date back to the 1930s.

**Citation Service:** No citation service is available.

**Research Assistance/Technical Support:** Office hours are Monday through Friday, 8 A.M.–5 P.M. Pacific Time. E-mails or voicemails can be left requesting assistance.

**Training:** Tutorials and technical guides are available on the Web site.

**Cost:** A flat rate structure of \$6.95 per user, per month, or an annual plan of \$83.40 per year and user are offered.

**New Products:** AdvanceLinks is an e-mail alert service that links users to recently released court opinions. Users can set up profiles of various legal topics to be alerted to, including: immigration, DWI, federal sentencing, legal malpractice, conflict of interests, sanctions and death penalty. V.News is a new product that gives users access to a large database of publications and news sources. Personal profiles can be set up by users for e-mail alerts regarding various topics.

## A Five-Step Process for Evaluating Internet Legal Databases

### 1. Content

**State Law:** Does the company provide case law for all states and the District of Columbia or just regional coverage, and, would that affect your research capabilities? Does the coverage include legislative, statutory, administrative, attorney general opinions and other regulatory materials for the state(s) that relate to your practice?

**Federal Law:** Does the company provide case law for all federal circuits and districts, and, if not, would that limit your research capabilities? Does the coverage include federal legislative, statutory, regulatory and administrative materials?

**Analytical Materials:** Does the company provide access to analytical treatises for your area of law? (If the company is owned by a legal publishing company the chances are good that they do provide access to whatever titles their company owns.) Is there access to other topical and subject matter databases that you must rely upon for your practice?

**Public Records:** Does the company provide access to public records such as property or land ownership, bankruptcy filings, uniform commercial code filings, basic company information and their financial records and filings?

**News and Periodicals:** Does the company provide access to newspapers, magazines, and journals? Does it provide access to legal and topical periodicals that relate to your practice?

### 2. Accuracy

**Up-to-Date:** Does the company provide the most up-to-date case law for both its state and federal law content? (Most court opinions are available within a 24- to 72-hour time frame so you should not rely upon a company that is not updating its content daily. Some companies will tell you what their update policies are, e.g., updates four times a day. You certainly do not want to submit a brief to a court that does not contain the most recent court opinion that supports your case.) Does the company provide the most up-to-date state and federal legislative, statutory, administrative and regulatory coverage?

**Extent of coverage:** Does the company provide a reasonable time-span of coverage for its materials? (Many companies offer varying degrees of coverage for state and federal case law, most dating back 50 to 70 years.) While these companies state that most attorneys do not need coverage dating back any further than that, are you sure that you want to risk missing a seminal court opinion related to your case?

**Source of content:** From what source does the company retrieve its data? Does it retrieve it directly from the court, legislative body, state or federal agency? If it does not obtain the data directly from the source of its origination, how reliable is that source? Is it from another legal Internet provider? How many parties are between the source of data and the company you are using? If the data goes through another company, does it manipulate it in any way that would compromise its accuracy?

**Errors:** From whatever source the company retrieves its data, does it have an editorial team that reviews the content for spelling errors, incorrect dates, or other inaccuracies before uploading it onto its system?

**Pagination:** Does the company provide a reasonable pagination system for its state and federal case law as well as its legislative, administrative and regulatory materials? (If not, it may be too cumbersome to cite to those opinions in the briefs you submit to the court.)

### 3. Clarity

**Web interface:** Does the company provide a Web interface that is simple to use? Does the login function provide for entering a client number so that even if you are paying a flat-fee for the service you still can track the time devoted to a client matter?

**Split-screens:** Does the company provide a split-screen interface or pop-up dialog boxes that allow you to maneuver in other databases while still keeping track of a original research query? Is there a mechanism to turn that function off?

**Advertisements:** Does the company rely upon advertisements to pay for its existence? If so, do these advertisements clutter the screen, making it difficult to maneuver?

**Navigability:** Are you able to navigate from one database to the next without confusion? Does the company provide a database reference guidebook to help you locate the materials that you need without spending time hunting for them? Are the databases set up so that you can easily navigate from a broader search to a more narrow focus?

**Tutorials and Demos:** Does the company provide any type of demo or online tutorial that would help you understand more clearly how to navigate its system?

#### 4. Reliability

**Citation Service:** Does the company provide a citation service for its material? While it would be hard to compete with the SHEPARD's™ service and Auto-Cite® of LexisNexis or the KeyCite™ service of Westlaw, does it provide a citation service that provides ample history and citing references for your practice? (You would not want to submit a brief to the court that relies upon an opinion that has been reversed or overturned.)

**Access:** Are you confident that you will be able to access the company's database any time, or is it unavailable while the system is being updated? Are connection times slow? Do you ever become logged off the system before you want to? Does the company maintain a log of your research queries so that you can return to them that day or that week to resume your research or to verify the time spent on a client's billable matter?

**Technical Support:** Does the company provide continuous customer and technical support service should you experience any type of connection or printing problems? Can you contact them through a toll-free telephone number?

**Training:** Does the company provide an on-going training system, either in person by one of their representatives or by telephone, so that you are apprised of all new databases and enhancements?

**Research Support:** Does the company provide experienced attorneys or law librarians who provide assistance formulating research queries or do they only provide a person with a technical or sales background instead?

#### 5. Cost

**Free Trial:** Does the company offer a free trial of its product?

**Contract:** Does the company demand that you sign a long-term contract for its services? If so, does it have built-in price hikes for the number of users, as well as quarterly or semi-annual automatic increases?

**Pricing:** Does the company allow you to customize your subscription? Does the company offer a reasonable all-you-can-eat flat rate subscription fee or is it per transaction or by minutes? Will the company give you information on how its fees have increased or decreased since it was first launched? Is the company providing value-added material in its databases that would necessitate an increase in price?

**Printing:** Does the company provide free printing and the ability to download or e-mail its product to other users? Does it provide its own printers, toner, and paper that you can build-in to your subscription or contract costs? If you experience printing problems, does its technical support staff offer assistance in resolving problems?

**Quality and Quantity:** Does the company provide both the quality and quantity of legal materials that you need? By using an alternative to Westlaw or LexisNexis, are you still confident that you are providing superior legal research and service to your clients?

### Conclusion

Virginia attorneys receive numerous advertisements and telephone solicitations from start-up Internet legal research companies. It is clear that there are going to be many new challengers to Westlaw and LexisNexis for the vast legal research market. The Virginia attorney must recognize that there may be quality alternative companies to Westlaw or LexisNexis. While these new companies will probably never replace either service, they may also provide solid and reliable research materials that complement Westlaw and LexisNexis at a lower-cost. Larger firms may consider using these low-cost alternative companies for their non-billable and pro bono matters. Even if you are in a small firm or a solo practitioner, there is always a Virginia law librarian who can assist you in making the right decision regarding these new Internet legal research companies. ⚖️

Endnotes are available on the following page.



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## ENDNOTES:

1. For a great synopsis of the archetype of the Trickster in Native American folklore, see *American Indian Trickster Tales*, selected and edited by Richard Erdoes and Alfonso Ortiz; Penguin Putnam, Inc. 1998.
2. For this company and many other pertinent reviews of new Internet legal research companies, T. R. Halvorson has written extensively for LLRX.com and for his own Web site: [<http://www.lexnotes.com>]. Halvorson employs a scale known as the SCOUG (Southern California Online Users Group) which subjects new Web products to a substantial credibility and usability criteria.  
*The LOIS Law Library: A View Through the Southern California Online Users Group Rating Scale Lenses*, LLRX.com™, March 1, 1999.
3. T. R. Halvorson, *National Law Library: A View Through the Southern California Online Users Group Rating Scale Lenses*, LLRX.com™, May 1, 2000.
4. T. R. Halvorson, *Quicklaw America: A View Through the Southern California Online Users Group Rating Scale Lenses*, LLRX.com™, October 1, 2000.
5. Roger V. Skalbeck, *The New Legal Browser That Could . . . TheLaw.net Examined and Explained*, LLRX.com™, January 15, 2001.
6. T. R. Halvorson, *VersusLaw's V: A View Through the Southern California Online Users Group Lenses*, LLRX.com™, March 15, 1999. Bryan M. Carson, *Versuslaw Review*, LLRX.com™, April 1, 1998.
7. For an excellent article on evaluating Internet legal research databases, see Susan B. Hersch. *Inundated with Offers for Legal Research Services on the Internet? Sorting out the Good, the Bad, and the Ugly*. LLRX.com™, May 1, 2001.